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Critiquing the Critical: A Reflection on Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

This paper is a reflection upon a central tension within discourse analysis. On the one hand, the use of the word *discourse* signals a desire to understand social interaction as it emerges for the people engaged in that interaction, yet on the other hand, the word *analysis* signals that language use will be studied in terms that are external to the sense-making of its participants. The discussion focuses in particular on critical discourse analysts, motivated by emancipatory goals, for it is for them that the tension is most acute. The paper proposes that greater theoretical emphasis be placed by critical discourse scholars on the analyst's interpretative labour. In particular, it argues that a more hermeneutic discourse analysis can begin to turn this central problem into a strength.

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This paper is a reflection upon a central tension within discourse analysis. On the one hand, the use of the word *discourse* signals a desire to understand social interaction as it emerges for the people engaged in that interaction – either as it makes sense to those people or as it unfolds in their everyday lives. On the other hand, the word *analysis* signals that language use is studied in terms that are, to some extent at least, external to the sense-making of its participants. I am concerned here with the particularly acute version of this problem which is faced by critical discourse analysts. Analysts who seek to expose unrecognised forces which shape thoughts and actions must necessarily impose their own categories upon the language users they study. The paper proposes greater theoretical emphasis be placed by critical discourse scholars on the analyst's interpretative labour. In particular, it argues that a more hermeneutic discourse analysis can begin to turn this central problem into a strength.

One great appeal of discourse analysis is that it works to reconcile a number of dyads. Discourse analysts differ from linguists in that they study language as action rather than as a set of rules, yet they look also for commonality and for the systemic in that action. Thus the pragmatics scholar Thomas (1995) talks of “principles” rather than “rules” of language use. In this view, discourse is both an everyday accomplishment of people and a structural category by which those everyday accomplishments are organised. Discourse analysis is about the emic (the insider's perspective) as well as the etic (the outsider's), in Pike's (1967) classic formulation. While the strength of

studying language in use is that it keeps both of these poles in view, there is a tendency to drift towards one or other pole in much analysis. Ironically, then, one great risk of discourse analysis is that analysis which is organised by pre-existing categories is passed off as grounded in the lived reality of social actors.

This problem is particularly acute in critical forms of discourse analysis, for here the aim is to reveal the – often unstated – workings of power. Maingueneau (2006) summarises critical discourse research:

Roughly speaking, discourse analysis would only describe discourse practices, whereas critical approaches to texts and talks would show how these hide power relations, prejudices, discrimination, and so on (p. 229).

This dichotomy can be easily overstated (as Maingueneau also notes) but critical discourse analysis, because it is explicitly bringing external perspectives to the language events it is studying, faces particularly sharply the accusation that it is misreading or over-reading its object of study in terms of the analyst's own politics. Sociological scholarship influenced by Marx has struggled for many years with this “paradox of emancipation” (Benton, 1981): radical critics of society struggle on behalf of the interests of oppressed groups who often do not recognise the interests ascribed to them. This position is theoretically justifiable through the theory of ideology, for part of being oppressed might well be to lose sight of one's own interests; however, in practice it is difficult to show that the analyst's reading embraces the oppressed group's actual interests.

One answer to the paradox is that analysts must listen carefully to what those they are studying are saying or doing. Benton, for example, argues that Marxism should abandon the notion of actual, “objective” interests. Instead its analysis of how people are disempowered “must be rooted in at least some aspect of the life-experience of those for whose identifications they are in competition” (Benton, 1981, p. 182). But critical forms of discourse analysis, particularly those which gather themselves together under the banner of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), are, I argue, guilty of not always listening. While I would not want to critique the political goals of this school of research, I make two specific criticisms. First, this approach, in looking for evidence of imbalances of power, is at risk of missing other aspects of the context of language use. Second, the approach’s roots in the functional linguistics of Halliday (e.g. 1994) exacerbates that neglect of how meaning arises in local contexts, and indeed leaves the social or political theory at times dissociated from the analysis of language use. As a result, assumptions about how society works may not be revised in the analysis. Consequently I propose a rethink of how critique relates to understanding in critical discourse analysis.

Critical Discourse Analysis

For many researchers of the social, the attraction of studying the details of discourse is the set of tools which critical discourse analysts have developed over the past 30 years to unpack the role of language and other symbolic forms such as images in maintaining social power. These include in particular the analysis of the ideological power of vocabulary, syntax, turn-taking, presupposition, themes, metaphors and narrative structure. For a researcher on the news, to take my area as an example, CDA helps to pin

down in details of language how prejudice or narrow sectional interests are perpetuated in the news. For example, Richardson (2007), in his CDA-informed textbook on newspaper discourse, shows how various textual forms can occlude aspects of meaning by logically presupposing them. Thus “wh-” questions, such as “Why do Islamist terrorist groups like al-Qaeda and Hamas want to crush the West and destroy Israel?” (*The Guardian*, 8 December, 2001), presuppose a great deal. (Here, they presuppose that these are both Islamist terrorist groups, that they do wish to crush both “the West” and Israel and that they are broadly similar in aim) (Richardson, 2007, pp. 63-4). While there are big question marks over the way language is linked to social life in these analyses (on which more below), they clearly provide a formidable toolkit for analysts with a critical political agenda.

Discourse analysis has, it must be said, always had a strong critical dimension. Many of those who pioneered the study of language in use sought to do so in order to ask questions about the power people have over others through talk and text or about the class-based judgements embedded in traditional linguistics and stylistics. These include Labov’s (1972) powerful case that urban black dialects of English are not ungrammatical, but follow a different grammar to the dominant variety, an argument which placed linguistics firmly within the political realm. They include Gumperz’s (1982) work on how English-speaking cultures’ different conventions of talk can lead to intercultural misunderstanding; feminist research on how talking positions are distributed unequally between the genders (e.g. Fishman, 1983); and work on how social status and ultimately dominance are expressed through ways of talking (e.g. Bernstein, 1972). It is clear that the research agenda since the

1970s to develop tools for the systematic study of how language works in relationships and social life more generally has often been inseparable from a critical agenda to explore how inequality, discrimination and injustice are perpetuated.

Critical discourse analysis has emerged as part of that wider project, but it has drawn particularly heavily on the Marxist textual analysis of the critical linguistics school, which emerged at the University of East Anglia in the late 1970s (e.g. Fowler, Hodge, Kress, & Trew, 1979). Its success in using linguistic categories of vocabulary and syntax to reveal ideological forces in ostensibly objective language led to its wide use in sociology, education and media studies. One of the more celebrated early analyses is Trew's (1979) study of British newspaper headlines on political violence in what was then Rhodesia. He argued that English grammar's power to turn active constructions into passive ones allowed the headline writer (perhaps unconsciously) to omit politically awkward details. In "Eleven Africans Shot Dead", the fact that it was police officers doing the killing could be elided away by such passivisation. Through this kind of analysis, critical linguistics established early on an argument that the functional elements of language described by linguistics could be leveraged to critique the exercise of power. While CDA has broadened its approach to draw upon other theories of language, particularly those of Foucault (Fairclough, 1995) and latterly Laclau and Mouffe (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002), the link between textual grammatical systems and systems of power has remained a significant element.

Criticism of CDA

The approach has been criticised on three main grounds: for its political commitment; for its emphasis on critique rather than understanding; and for the Hallidayan theory which underpins a number of its analytical tools and strategies. I deal only briefly with the first set of arguments, which take issue with the political agendas of CDA scholars as non-objective and therefore inadequate, for I want to argue that a critical agenda is not only valid but imperative to rich understanding of discourse. Widdowson (e.g. 1995) is among the leading critics of CDA from this perspective and his chief concern is that critical discourse analysts arrive at their analyses with agendas and preconceptions which skew their readings. It is certainly useful to point out that someone like Trew wrote the analysis above fresh from a South African prison, where he had been imprisoned for his work with the banned African National Congress. His political anger would certainly have shaped the questions he asked, but it is a big jump to argue that his politics would necessarily make his findings less valid than those of researchers who read the newspaper headline without a well-formed political analysis of apartheid. There are two points here. Firstly, the criticism asks only half the question about prior commitments. We must also ask about the underlying agendas and preconceptions of the non-radical discourse analyst. Unless one holds tight to a positivist concept of knowledge, the observer is clearly part of the analysis. Secondly, the criticism (see Schegloff, 1999 for a similar concern) misreads as mere opinion the use of a well-developed political theory – here a mix of Marxism and post-colonialism – to cast light on language use. The problem of critical forms of discourse analysis is not that they are critical.

What is of concern in this paper is the way CDA scholars struggle to balance the understanding of discourse with its critique. CDA researchers, like many in the tradition of textual analysis, remove texts from their immediate contexts in order to read them within political and macro-social contexts. While they theorise context, using terms such as genre, register or setting, they study the text rather than speakers or listeners. In the second edition of *Language as Ideology* Hodge and Kress (1993) added a chapter in which they recognised that texts may have different meanings for different people depending on their social and personal background. But the problem is more serious than the absence of reception analysis to complement the textual analysis: it is the orientation of the critic towards what I would term ideology hunting. As a result, the CDA critic is at grave risk of neglecting aspects of meaning of a text or the complex ways in which meaning is constructed in daily life. Richardson's example from *The Guardian* cited above fails to point out that the sentence he analyses sits on top of a provocative opinion piece and that, therefore, it belongs to a genre which writer and reader alike would recognise as not making the same reality claims as news articles. The empirical question of the different ideological power of texts from this persuasive genre to that of texts from the ostensibly descriptive genre of the news is not addressed. It seems that the drive to critique rushes us past such questions.

CDA's problem, then, is to engage in radical criticism without oversimplifying discourse as lived by people, for at the heart of the critical approach to the social is the act of stepping outside those people's frames to an extent. This involves raising questions which may not often arise in the

speaker's context, such as whose interests a statement or other verbal act serves, or how the dominance of one way of thinking or acting over others is reinforced. Similarly, the critical attitude often involves reintroducing the interests of others, and asking what of these other interests is being omitted, hidden or silenced. Indeed, critical discourse analysis is sometimes construed as meaning to deconstruct or de-sanctify knowledge claims and social practices that are made in dominant discourses (see Threadgold, 1994). This fundamentally means seeking to place some distance between the analyst and the object of study, regarding social practices as contingent on their histories and contexts and the knowledge they produce as always partial.ⁱ The analyst must have a foot outside the practice being studied as well as a foot within it, in order for these questions of interests to arise and in order to see what is not there but which, in the framework of the analyst, could or even should be there. That outsider foot has to be situated in another set of social knowledge that can make claims to know something about the practice. It is precisely the presence, then, of an explicit political commitment that ensures the analysis is founded on more than, in Widdowson's terms, opinion.

It is, however, always hard to balance one foot inside and one outside the practice in this way. CDA in particular is open to the criticism that it has gone too far down the outsider orientation. It is, Meyer (2001, p. 16) notes, at risk of being "text-reducing" rather than "text-extending". That is, it pulls out certain elements which it regards as important in the ideological functioning of the text and neglects other aspects. For example, Jones (2007, p. 363) points out that Fairclough's (2000) CDA analysis of neo-liberal talk about globalisation does not engage with the multiple forces shaping that talk.

Fairclough argues that politicians such as then British Prime Minister Tony Blair present increasing global economic interdependence as inevitable by using an abstract and depersonalised language. It is certainly a valid point that such language makes it hard for counter positions to emerge about the power of individual countries to pursue alternative versions of global trade. But Jones notes that Fairclough has almost nothing to say about the forces and discourses constraining Tony Blair. Fairclough closes down analysis by making a political point rather than opening up questions about politics in an age of globalisation.

This same problem arises to an extent when Van Dijk finds racism in various forms of discourse. Although Van Dijk's 20-year-long project on the discourse of racism is impressive in its accumulation of evidence, and although it is supported by a robust cognitive model of how people process the new in terms of what they already know, much of the analysis depends upon Van Dijk looking for racist discourse. Theoretically, Van Dijk establishes that much of the meaning of discourse lies in the cognitive structures which are mobilised in individual speakers' and hearers' minds. These scripts and models can be theorised but are, by definition, difficult to find in language, except as traces and logical precursors (Van Dijk, 1988). All that can be done is to find text which is consistent with them and do the considerable interpretative work to link them up. In one analysis, Van Dijk (1996) shows how an article from *The Sun* newspaper about illegal immigrants working in the UK fails to mention the local businesspeople who are illegally employing the immigrants (and indeed exploiting them by paying them low wages). He also argues that the article's sense depends upon a socially shared proposition

that “they” are taking “our” jobs – a notion that is nowhere stated but needs to be brought by the reader in order to make sense of the information as newsworthy. His analysis of how prejudice perpetuates itself through the use of a few key words that call up “what everyone knows” is, for me, convincing. Yet it points also to the dependence of such critical analysis upon finding gaps in the text and then filling them in. For an analyst who expects to see a racist society, the implied meanings are clear, and Van Dijk shows the plausibility that the text would reinforce racist understandings among those who already think like that. But it is difficult to establish from the textual evidence that people producing and reading the text do indeed share these meanings. Because Van Dijk relies upon his own interpretations of the texts he uses, ultimately the only context in which the texts are read is that of the critical analyst looking for racism.

This problem is particularly acute in the significant body of CDA work which relies on a functional grammar of language devised by Halliday and colleagues, called systemic functional linguistics (SFL) (Halliday, 1994). SFL, and therefore critical analysis which uses its categories, is still more distanced from the lived discourse of people talking, writing and reading, because it ascribes communicative functions to textual elements, allowing analysts to read off meaning by grammatically parsing the text. The theory allows analysts to identify the set of options available in English to do a certain kind of linguistic operation. Critical scholars then interpret the use of one of these options as potentially shaped by political forces. The most widely studied linguistic operation is transitivity, or the way in which English allows processes and participants to be portrayed in clauses. One current version of

SFL (Martin & Rose, 2003) finds five options here, and the choice of using one of these can be explored as a meaningful choice, perhaps even an ideological choice, fitting into preconceptions about who does what in society.

Cameron (2001) sums up the argument:

When someone expresses an idea in form X (using these particular words and this particular grammatical structure), it is significant that they are *not* expressing the idea in form Y or Z, though Y and Z would also have been possibilities. CDA looks for the ideological significance of the choices speakers and writers make, and for significant patterns in the distribution of their choices. (p. 51)

Thus an *FHM* magazine article which textually places men firmly in the position of doing things to women, particularly looking at them, and women in the position of being talked about or looked at can be argued to be cementing in gender discrimination even before the leering and patronising semantic level of the text is considered (see Matheson, 2005 for further analysis).

The reliance on a theory of language that claims to be able to map social functions onto the formal or surface aspects of the language – without exploring in depth aspects of the particular language event – appears problematic to both linguists from other traditions (Harris, 1996) and some CDA scholars. Simpson (1993, p. 113) notes that there is a danger of drifting into “the untenable hypothesis that a particular linguistic feature, irrespective of its context of use, will always generate a particular meaning”. He therefore advocates “a modicum of caution” (p.113) in using SFL’s tools in analysing texts. Thus, a text where men are performing the action, and women are not, may not be sexist, if it is critically describing a sexist situation, for example.

But while this grammar provides a useful checklist of language features to explore, the caution Simpson recommends in interpreting them only takes us so far. The interpretation can still proceed without factoring in the myriad other aspects of communication which other discourse analytic approaches emphasise: the pragmatic meaning in that particular context, the turn-taking rules of that particular exchange, or the wider expectations of that situation. Sometimes the analysis works well, although it is limited. To say “chairman” rather than “chairperson” is a linguistic choice between largely equivalent terms, and the preference reveals – and reinforces – a patriarchal discourse grounded in a time when only men could chair most kinds of formal meeting. But the analysis is unable to go much further without richer data on context. Is this a conscious choice to privilege a male term, or indeed to privilege a term that the speaker might argue has lost any gendering assumptions? Does the person using “chairman” realistically have other options, or have others determined the usage in that context, as is the case with some local authorities where “chairman” is the legal term? What power does a gendering term have to reposition men and women in this particular social context?ⁱⁱ Much remains to be said about how power is operating here.

More seriously, however, the apparent grammatical choice of using this form rather than that form may not be a socially available one much of the time. Pragmatics shows us that the same language item can mean very different things according to context. Linguistic form does not translate straightforwardly into meaning, because what people do with language is deeply intertwined with social rules and social action. In addition, corpus linguistics has shown quite impressively that linguistic form is also often

relatively fixed by convention, despite what grammar allows. Stubbs (2001) notes that the verbal form “seeks” is used almost exclusively in lonely hearts advertisements, as in, “Professional man gsh seeks blonde 20s”. Many of that word’s possible grammatical uses are, it seems, socially unavailable. What SFL provides, then, is a list of language items but a fairly weak social theory about how the grammatical entity is used to achieve and communicate things in social life.

Instead, the analyst reads the textual evidence in terms of another set of theories of politics and social life. Luke (2004) talks of the need to “shunt” the text up to that level in order to make an argument about social power:

To do so entails a series of “shunts”, often in no particular order or sequence – from text analysis to social analysis, from the analysis of discourse to implications about its consequential conditions of production and deployment, from some order of discourse analytic metalanguage to social, cultural and political theory, broadly defined (p. 150).

As a consequence of this shift from one theoretical frame to another, the social and political theories will not always be tested by the evidence they are applied to. Simpson writes:

A crude formulation of the problem ... would be to say that linguistic analysis is invoked to support what an analyst already knows and that, rather than being able to decipher ideological bias, linguistics is therefore really only a supplement to the prior reading the analyst has made (Simpson, 1993, p. 114).

CDA's project of critique – rather than of understanding – makes it vulnerable to such attacks.

As Benton noted in relation to the paradox of emancipation, discussed earlier, social analysis which places the ideas motivating critique beyond critique themselves, is philosophically untenable and at times even authoritarian. O'Regan (2006) – himself a CDA scholar – makes a related point in arguing that CDA in general is insufficiently reflexive. Indeed, not only does it hold onto a set of non-negotiables about the truths of society, but it also espouses a set of theoretical frameworks that see any truth as contingent and constructed through discourse. O'Regan (p. 233) talks of “a kind of metaphysical letting go with one hand, while grabbing on again with the other”, which results in incoherent theory:

Let me be clear about this, I am not saying that I disagree with the agendas which Luke, McKenna, Rajagopalan, Fairclough and others put forward for doing critical work. On the contrary, I fully support them. My problem is how we are supposed to *know* on theoretical grounds that our perspective is the “correct” one. This is not at all clear, and Luke's (2005) suggestion that it is simply a matter of “professing one's reading position – out front and subject to scrutiny of all kinds” (p. 200) does not do the trick, although I wish it did. Self-reflexivity works only if it includes the admission at the start that one's situated perspective precludes the possibility of making judgements of truth, but I suspect that for some, and I do not necessarily mean Luke, this may be to concede too much (p. 233).

In other words, the critical agenda of the scholar must be regarded as just another discourse, something that stands as another version of reality rather than a transcendent one. Yet the fact that this political agenda precedes and is not available for modification from the material studied treats it as if it were transcendent. At times CDA wants to leap too fast to the macro level – what Fairclough (1995) calls the order of discourse – the level that is for many CDA scholars the determining level and hence where power ultimately lies.

Finding Tools of Interpretation

This problem is at heart one of interpretation. Discourse analysis needs analytical tools which allow it to interpret partly in terms of actors' own categories and understandings and partly in terms of critical questions and sociological understandings of how people's lives are shaped by social forces. Some critical discourse analysts do seek such balance in their analyses. Wodak, for example, runs focus groups alongside her textual analyses in her studies of the discourses of race and nationhood in Austria (e.g. Wodak, 1996). But the logical outcome, in my view, of the arguments put forward by Simpson, O'Regan and me is that critical discourse analysis needs to move away from the strong use of textual tools which systemic functional linguistics opened up. Advances in discourse analysis point firmly in the direction of the inadequacy of theories of language which propose relatively fixed relationships between text and meaning. Language means different things in different contexts – indeed, discourse analysis's claim to value as a methodology is its sensitivity to the lived quality of meaning. Moreover, as Benton notes, the analyst is not in a defensible position to decide a priori what that context is. Analysts who do so are at risk of being called paternalistic.

Hermes (2000) expresses an ethics, which I would call an ethics of understanding, which I argue underpins good discourse analysis:

Feminist research, for me, is synonymous with showing respect. This is one of the reasons why I came to prefer the use of discourse analysis rather than more naturalistic and descriptive frameworks. After all, how are you to do justice to the complexities of another person's life – morally, methodologically or theoretically?....[A] discourse perspective allowed me to neatly circumvent that old ghost of paternalism: of knowing better than my respondents what moved them and how popular forms had meaning for them (p. 356).

There are problems with taking this position too far as well, of course, and media reception studies has been guilty of forgetting to critique the manipulative and consumerist aspects of popular culture at times in its celebration of people's meaning-making. But what Hermes' own work, a politically informed analysis of the gendering of magazine readers (e.g. Hermes, 1995) achieved, was a study of language use in which that political agenda was modified by what she heard. This was possible because she did not proceed with two separate theoretical systems, one to explain how meaning arises in text and one to explain the deployment of that meaning.

I am not arguing for an abandonment of textual analysis which draws upon tools such as transitivity, presupposition, lexical analysis and the like. Critical discourse analysis has pulled together many useful tools. However, I am arguing for a reappraisal among some critical discourse scholars of some habits of critique. In particular, the object of study deserves respect, which is to say it deserves to be understood partly in its own terms. As Jaworski and

Coupland (1999, p. 37) note, discourse analysis is left with “tentativeness, more context relatedness, more contingency, more tolerance of ambiguity” once it scales back its ambitions in this way, but it gains in depth. In particular, it is more successful at maintaining a foot in the world of meaning as experienced by participants.

There is in this argument a bias towards phenomenological approaches, which propose that social life can only be adequately understood as people’s unfolding experience of the meaning of things – the theory that shapes Foucault, Habermas, symbolic interactionists, ethnomethodologists, and others who are sceptical of Cartesian and structuralist categories. Whatever version of phenomenology is preferred, these are all distanced from rule and value-based sociology – what we can bundle under the word functionalism. Flyvbjerg (2001) argues that social science’s biggest mistake is to try to act like the natural sciences, because social life is not predictable in the same way according to universal rules. Social action can be described in terms of rules, but these will only ever be approximations because action is not experienced like that by people. Instead, the concert performer draws upon a tacit knowledge of how to play the instrument, the journalist just knows what a good story is and the nanoscientist has a feel for the rightness of a statement about how quarks move. The functional or structural analysis of the violinist is at risk of being limited to understanding the rules that a Suzuki violin student would be learning – the practice without the experience. If we are to critically investigate the discursive dimension of social life, then, we need to engage with the experience in some way. In this view, CDA’s already-

made commitment to an overall interpretative framework, combined with the use of structuralist-functionalist linguistics, obstructs analysis.

My position is that criticism and understanding are not distinct modes of analysis but moments of interpretation which imply the other. The hermeneutics which has emerged out of phenomenology (in particular Gadamer (1979) and Ricoeur & Ihde (2007)) proposes that rich understanding proceeds on the basis of prejudgements which the listener allows to be modified by what is heard. In Gadamer's careful formulation, the task of the critic is to understand what the text truly means to her or him, seeking meaning without giving up the independence of her or his thinking. Neither the understanding of author of the text nor the critic-reader is imposed on the other. For a critical discourse analyst seeking evidence of structures of dominance, such an approach is anathema, for it undercuts the project. But it begins to answer O'Regan's question, "how we are supposed to know...our perspective is the 'correct' one?" The correct answer, or the most correct interpretation for each particular critic, emerges as the outcome of a process of ethical engagement by the critic with the meaning-making of the subject.

Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) discourse theory contributes here, particularly to salvaging some ability to make claims about the real and about inequalities of power in society. They propose that discursive power lies to a considerable extent in fixity, particularly in the ability to ascribe meanings that serve particular interests in key "nodal terms". What hermeneutics does is make those meanings provisional and contested again. Mouffe in her later work argues that this is the task of critical analysis. She argues that politics can be understood as an irreconcilable struggle over meaning, in which the

multiple acts of interpretation by people in everyday life as well as in more overt “institutional” politics are sites of struggles for power. For Mouffe, the goal of critique is pluralism not consensus – in fact, she states that any consensus is a provisional hegemony, or stabilisation of power, which will exclude some perspectives ((Mouffe, 2000, p. 17). Society’s health, then, depends upon “the recognition and legitimation of conflict and the refusal to suppress it by imposing an authoritarian order” (p. 16). Discourse analysts should not therefore look at texts as the marks of power but instead at the political contestation for meaning as a process of making power. The critical goal is to keep the process of disagreement open.

This is not entirely satisfactory as an aim for critical discourse analysis, for it makes the critical project contingent and more tentative when powerful dominant discourses such as those of nationalism or economic progress stridently assert their truth; nonetheless, I think the direction is right. A more hermeneutically informed discourse analysis will be more tentative and contingent as it becomes better attuned to people’s lived experiences, and therefore will be less able to participate in grand periodising discourses about social structure. In order to do so, it needs to be augmented, as a number of scholars have suggested (e.g. Cameron, 2001, p. 140; Philo, 2007; Wodak, 2001), by ethnographic, historical or participant research. It also needs to rely less on categorisations and taxonomies of language features, such as SFL grammar, which cannot be shown to emerge from the material being studied. But it need not be seen as less critical for its greater emphasis on understanding. Understanding and consensus need to be held separate.

Ultimately, what is at stake here is recuperating the analyst's act of understanding as a critical tool.

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ⁱ Indeed, discourse analysis has roots in the literal de-sanctification of knowledge by exegetes of the Bible who sought to understand holy writings as texts which could be built on through further texts, rather than as the final and unalterable word of God.

ⁱⁱ Some of my students recently argued that “chairman” has no power among them to construct an expectation that the recipient would be male, on the grounds that they lived in a society where a gendered division of labour in chairing meetings made no sense.